

Program Startup Workshop

The CH-53K Heavy Lift Helicopter Program

Col. Paul Croisetiere, USMC ■ David Haines ■ Duane Mallicoat

Expeditionary warfare planners and strategists faced a dilemma: The extraordinarily relevant but aging CH-53E “Super Stallion” helicopter would not have the performance required to move the heavy equipment of the Marine Expeditionary Brigade of 2015 deep into the littorals in one period of darkness. Additionally, fatigue life expenditure and a lack of investment in reliability improvements had created significant in-service inventory issues and high operations and support costs.

The solution: a derivative design of the CH-53E (the CH-53K) that integrates existing technology to allow the Marine Corps to lift armored vehicles up to 15 tons out to a distance of 110 nautical miles at Navy “High-Hot” conditions (3000 feet, 91.5 degrees Fahrenheit). Moreover, survivability, force protection, and interoperability improvements would be designed in from the start. Supportability design choices and a cost-wise sustainment strategy would result in an affordable heavy-lift helicopter.

CH-53K Program Startup

After Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics Ken Krieg approved entry of the Marine Corps’ CH-53K program into system development and demonstration in December 2005, the government awarded the CH-53K system development and demonstration cost-plus award fee contract to Sikorsky Aircraft Corporation in April 2006. As the program moved towards contract award, the leadership of the H-53 Heavy Lift Helicopters Program Office, PMA-261, anticipated the need to step program execution off on the right foot, particularly with respect to integrating organizations and establishing effective communications. The first step was to contact the Defense Acquisition University to leverage their considerable experience in organizational development and major acquisition program management. DAU’s recommendation: conduct a program startup workshop (PSW).

What is a Program Startup Workshop?

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The PSW’s purpose is to improve the execution of programs as they progress through the acquisition process by fostering the formation of that cohesive team. The workshop is viewed as the foundation for developing trust and effective communication for the entire team. DAU can facilitate the workshop and specifically tailor its scope to the program. The duration is sized to the outcomes that the program manager desires from the workshop: the range is usually 2½ to 4 days.

We have all heard that one never gets a second chance to make a first impression. This is true more than ever in today’s major defense acquisition programs. Accordingly, the PSW is typically scheduled no later than 30 to 90 days after contract award. Experience shows 30 days is optimal, but the PSW can be held at other times to meet program needs.

Croisetiere is the H-53 program manager, with responsibilities that span the CH-53K program and in-service support of 217 H-53 helicopters. **Haines** is the CH-53K program manager at Sikorsky Aircraft Corp. **Mallicoat** is a professor of systems acquisition management and life-cycle logistics for Defense Acquisition University Mid-Atlantic Region and was the lead facilitator for the PMA-261 Program Startup Workshop.

What Types of Activities Make up a Workshop?

The agenda of the workshop is driven by the PM, but previous workshops contain common topics that include, but are not limited to, seamless organization plan and processes, effective communication plan, common team goals, common team vision and sub-team charters, joint “single metrics,” and risk-management process. PSWs also foster invaluable team building between industry and government teammates.

How Can a PSW Benefit Your Program?

The typical outcome from a PSW has been to help build a cohesive team where all members are aligned to the program goals: one team, one playbook, and one vision. There are benefits for each stakeholder, and crafting a tailored, facilitated approach can result in noticeable leaps in program organization and efficiencies. Classroom scenarios are supplemented with lessons learned from current programs.

What are the Challenges to a Successful Workshop?

Challenges are part of any new program, but they are not necessarily a negative aspect. In the case of the PSW, the biggest hurdle for the government PM is to anticipate, in concert with the industry PM, significant challenges to program execution and to ensure those risks, issues, and opportunities are considered during the workshop.

As DAU’s experience with PSWs has grown, the common challenge to emerge has been structuring the PSW to accomplish program needs. The hardest aspect is often identifying the critical goals that must be accomplished during a PSW and then fitting those goals or tasks within the allotted time. Using the agendas of other PSWs as a baseline is a good starting point, but each PSW must be tailored to meet specific program requirements. The challenges then become opportunities for both the government and industry as they build their joint seamless team.

The CH-53K PSW

The team that organized this June 2006 event consisted of senior leaders from Sikorsky, PMA-261, and DAU. We established four major goals for our PSW:



Engineering Drawing of the CH-53K

Artist’s rendering courtesy Sikorsky Aircraft Corporation.

- Produce critical program startup products, such as team charters, a communication plan, and identification of critical program challenges.
- Educate the joint program team on institutional requirements unique to the government (defense acquisition executive summary, selected acquisition report, acquisition program baseline, etc.) and Sikorsky (corporate vision and goals, program objectives). Additionally, a detailed brief was provided on the require-

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ments for the integrated baseline review, the first contract milestone the program team would tackle.

- Educate the team on new acquisition concepts and best practices, such as opportunity management, risk management, and the establishment of relevant metrics.
- Continue to build an environment of teamwork, trust, collaboration, and effective communication.

All PSW participants completed critiques and provided insight on the events that provided best value for the team. The team identified the most valuable aspects of the PSW to be:

- Teaming with their industry/government counterparts. Surprised this ranked #1? Teammates spent much of the workshop seated next to or across from each other, discussing program challenges and getting consensus on team charters. For many, this was the first opportunity to share strategic program considerations. Moreover, teammates had the opportunity to listen to differing points of view. All recognized that effective communication and trust will be required to work through the challenges that present themselves within this program. Program leaders were pleasantly surprised that the team saw this teaming opportunity as the most valuable aspect of the workshop.
- Charter working groups. Development of team charters is where most of the detailed work was accomplished. While the participants had worked together for several months, most did not have the opportunity to properly define structures, processes, and plans for their integrated product teams. This particular activity was regarded as one of the better investments made during the PSW.
- Opportunity management. This is a relatively new acquisition concept or best practice that few on the team knew about. The PSW provided the perfect environment for the team to brainstorm on how to exploit po-

tential program opportunities, particularly in the context of a cost plus award fee contract. This valued activity highlighted the benefit of having DAU participation in this event—DAU brought good ideas and emerging policy into early program execution.

Follow-on Workshop

There was general consensus among the joint CH-53K team that the PSW was a valuable event, with discussion regarding the merits of follow-on events at critical points during contract execution. Follow-on events to the PSW could allow the team to refine relationships, update team charters, and review program challenges. Possible topics and activities identified by the team for a follow-on workshop event include:

- Discuss issues and challenges that lie between the system functional review, preliminary design review, and critical design review.
- Improve communication processes for individual integrated product teams.
- Refine and improve team charters.

The CH-53K program team will conduct future workshops or management meetings to discuss these and other topics. With DAU now a stakeholder in the CH-53K process, the program will aggressively work to leverage DAU's early involvement in the program in future program workshops.

What's in it for You?

A PSW is a valuable program management tool and can contribute to accomplishing critical start-up tasks for acquisition execution. We cannot overstate the importance of taking time to get the entire team together, away from the routine of managing a program, to focus PM efforts at a strategic level. It is time very well spent. One major lesson learned was that charter development is very time-intensive, and adequate time must be budgeted within a workshop to accomplish this specific goal. Most important, one can never underestimate the benefits of teaming opportunities, especially between government and industry.

So can the PSW be a benefit to your program? Absolutely! Is it a cure-all? Absolutely not. What it can do is offer some great opportunities for joint team building and the establishment of common program goals and policies. The PSW is gaining popularity as a best practice for DoD acquisition programs and is another resource available to the PM to maximize program efficiencies and effectiveness throughout the acquisition life cycle.

The authors welcome comments and questions. Contact them at paul.croisetiere@navy.mil, dhaines@sikorsky.com, and duane.mallicoat@dau.mil.